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SUBJECT: RUSSIA'S DEFENSE MINISTER RAISES PUBLIC PROFILE

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Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs Alice G. Wells.
Reasons 1.4 (B/D).

1. (C) SUMMARY; Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov has made himself more available to the media and the general public in recent weeks. Although he is careful to limit his remarks to issues within his core portfolio, an "interactive interview" in a prominent newspaper last week featured many of the hallmarks of political campaigning. END SUMMARY.

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IVANOV'S FOREIGN POLICY TOUR D'HORIZON

2. (SBU) Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov fielded questions from "Izvestia" readers in an article published 9 November. The newspaper reportedly had solicited questions in advance from readers, resulting in over 500 submissions from around the country via Internet, e-mail, and telephone. Among the issues Ivanov chose to address in his published remarks:

-- Russia is concerned about nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea but, "unlike the U.S.," Moscow has never divided countries of the world into friends and foes or sought to demonize countries or their leaders with designations like "axis of evil." Russia can play a unique mediating role in reducing tensions with these countries.

-- The Middle East is a region critical to Russia's geopolitical and economic interests; "mutually advantageous" cooperation with Iran and Syria pays "tangible economic and political dividends."

-- The Baltic states have not reciprocated Russia's goodwill, including being the first nation to recognize their independence; instead, these states have allowed Nazi veterans to march in their streets, while treating ethnic Russians as second-class citizens.

-- While the international community, including Russia, recognizes the territorial integrity of Georgia, Tbilisi authorities have been belligerent in their approach to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Although it is difficult to predict the outcome for these two regions, much will depend on "how the West deals with Kosovo's independence."

-- All Russian troops will depart the Tbilisi garrison by the end of December 2006. Withdrawal from the base in Akhalkalaki will be completed in 2007 and from the base in Batumi in 2008. Moscow is currently organizing two separate mountain brigades for deployment in Dagestan and Karachayevo-Cherkessia to ensure security in the North

Caucasus.

-- Russia will not join NATO and remains skeptical of the need for such an Alliance in the wake of the break-up of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact. However, Moscow will continue to cooperate with NATO to maintain global security, combat international terrorism, and prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

-- Moscow has many questions about the proposed deployment of a U.S. missile defense system in east central Europe to intercept missiles from Iran. Russia will find "asymmetrical, but no less effective" ways to ensure its security.

-- The Kuril Islands are an inalienable part of Russia in accordance with agreements with the Allied powers at the end of World War II. Discussion about their return to Japan is "nothing more than speculation."

-- Russia does not plan to challenge U.S. or NATO maritime supremacy. Its naval shipbuilding program is focused on construction of smaller vessels, like corvettes and frigates, that are suitable for coastal protection and defense of the country's economic interests.

-- Hazing is a long-standing problem in the military that existed, without publicity, even during the Soviet period. In addition, the quality of conscripts and the social status of officers was much higher during that period -- these are negative trends that the Government is trying to reverse despite anticipated difficulties in training draftees expected to serve for only 12 months beginning in 2008. Housing problems for military personnel will be resolved by

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IVANOV POSITIONING FOR PRESIDENTIAL RACE?

13. (C) One of our contacts, Aleksandr Sharavin, Director of the Institute for Political and Military Analysis, dismissed Ivanov's interview as "pedestrian questions, pedestrian answers." Sharavin, a former member of the General Staff, emphasized that Ivanov's remarks contained no new information and speculated that Defense Ministry officials had screened the questions before Ivanov chose the specific issues to address. He added that Ivanov's public relations were part of a campaign to position himself to become the next president despite his public claims to the contrary. All of Ivanov's actions should be assessed in this context, including "Izvestiya's" open forum, which mimics President Vladimir Putin's interactive exchange with the public last month (reftel).

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COMMENT

14. (C) Ivanov's "interactive interview" follows closely on the heels of Putin's 25 October live session with the public and closely mirrors it in tone and format -- with the obvious exception of not being "live." Although Ivanov told one "Izvestiya" questioner that he was too busy with military reform to think about presidential elections, the interview nonetheless had all the trappings of an orchestrated effort to cast the often combative minister as "in command" and fully capable of addressing some of the nation's most important security challenges.

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